

SHIFTING GEARS

THE CHANGING MEANING OF WORK IN MASSACHUSETTS, 1920-1980

GARDNER, MASSACHUSETTS

INTERVIEWEE: Stella Smith

INTERVIEWER: Martha Norkunas

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TRANSCRIBER: Lynda Luden

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MN: Today is March 1st, 1989 and I'm here with Stella Smith, is your last name, isn't it? Why do I not know your last name? Smith, right? Yeah. With Stella Smith on Bartell Ave. in Gardner. OK. Stella. Some of this we might have talked about at the reunions but tell me again anyway. How is it that your family came to Gardner?

SS: Well, I was born and brought up in Gardner. My folks came from Italy. My mother first came - my father came first and he and he sent out for her and she landed and stayed with some friends in Wakefield and I guess they had moved to New Jersey because my older sister was born in Trenton, New Jersey. And then they moved to Gardner, we've been here ever since. In fact I was born right across the street here.

MN: What is it that brought them to Gardner?

SS: I don't know. They just happened to come this way. Yeah. 'Cause there were very few Italians at the time in Gardner.

MN: Were there later more Italians?

SS: Hmm? There's not-there's more now, yes. But it's more,

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mostly, Gardner was mostly French people, alot of French, Finnish, Polish. Very few Italians at the time. Even now I don't think there's that many. Most of, more like in Boston, Fitchberg, places like that.

MN: Did your family belong to an Italian club or anything?

SS: I think my father used to belong to an Italian club.

MN: But probably in Fitchberg.

SS: No, in Gardner they used to have a--in fact they still got one in Gardner, but it's more privately owned, it's not the same.

MN: And did either your father or your mother work in any of the furniture companies?

SS: My father worked at Heywood's and he worked at and he worked at LaHerne's. He was a first class painter, he was very good at it.

MN: Painter?

SS: Um hmm. He could, he could paint walls free hand, he could make designs, oh, he was very good at it.

MN: Oh. What do you mean, designs?

SS: Well, he could make like a, I don't know, like a design on your wall, like a paint has lines or something, I don't know how to explain it, he was very good at it. He was smart, anyway, yeah, he could write good and everything.

MN: And he did this painting with, on the furniture he did the painting or on the walls.?

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SS: Well, on furniture, too, I think that's what he did at Heywood's. He painted. But, he could, you know, he made lamps, too, marble lamps.

MN: Marble lamps?

SS: Yeah, I still got one upstairs, I'm going to give to myrsister, her boy, he likes to have it. Yeah, he was very smart.

MN: So what about your mother?

SS: Well, she was a housewife, my mother. That's what she did all her life. She had her hands full, anyway, with eight children.

MN: How many were you?

SS: Eight. We're poor, too, so she had a lot of cooking. Everything like that. She made her own bread. All the kids in the neighborhood used to smell it, come down for it. (laughs)

MN: Did she make her own pasta?

SS: Once in a while, yeah, like homemade macaroni. Can't get it today, go to a restaurant, ain't the same as what you make yourself.

MN: Do you know how?

SS: Uh, I used to, I don't do nothing no more. I'm lazy, I guess.

MN: And where were you in the order of kids, where you the oldest?

SS: Third.

MN: The third.

SS: Um humm. Yeah, my sister, Martha, she passed away, and my

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brother, Frank, and my sister Toni just, she just passed away last November, she was living out in Michigan. Um hmm.

MN: And as you were growing up did you have to help around the house or, or do special--?

SS: We all had to do our share of work, yeah. I used to babysit alot, years ago, and I started young. Eleven years old, I think, babysitting, and then--

MN: Your own k--, your own sisters and brothers?

SS: No. Different people. Yeah. I used to love kids. Yeah. I used to got out of the house and just see if there was a baby around and wheel it. Funny thing, I never had any of my own. But I was close to alot of them. In fact, I don't know if I got one (commotion in background, drops something, unintelligible) there's dust on it.

MN: Oh, and that was a neighborhood kid?

SS: He's my nephew.

MN: Oh, nephew.

SS: (very faint, hard to make out) a lot of us in our family, newpews and nieces, we're close. Well, Italian people are close, anyway.

MN: Do you think more so than other groups?

SS: I don't know about now, but they used to be. Very close. The others are all just as nice, it ain't that one's better than the other, it's just that there just more close family ties, I think. Like he was a, my father, my husband, rather, and that one, David, like father and son because his father died

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when he was only about five weeks old, I guess, And his brother was only about four years old. Yeah, was sad.

MN: Your husband's father died?

SS: No. That boy's father. Yeah. My husband was like a father to him, he misses him even to this day.

MN: Does he live in Gardner here with you?

SS: Um hmm. On Clark St. Yeah.

MN: And then, would the other kids in the family have picked up little jobs here and there?

SS: Yeah, I guess we all did our share. We all had little jobs here and there like that. Yeah. Was rough.

MN: And what, did you have to, did your parents want you to leave school and go to work.

SS: No, I won't say that, but we're poor, too, and it was pretty hard going to school. Cause one, one of my brothers gave up his part of going to school so my other brother could go. When you don't have money, it's kinda rough, I remember walking, we used to walk from here to high school, see I lived right on _____ street, right after Little Peach, that's where I lived and only over here and I was born across the street. So _____ (unintelligible) here. Yeah.

MN: So your whole world has been this street.

SS: Yeah, and out on Roubilard St. were 57 kids just cross like this, that's all, right across.

MN: All together, there were 57 kids?

SS: Fifty seven kids. One had seventeen, one had thirteen, cross from, and we were eight, and, figure it out and was 57.

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MN: And were they Italian?

SS: Well, _____ (unintelligible). French, Italian Swede, we got em all perfect. There's more arguments about religion today than we had in those days. Catholics were very strict, they wouldn't allow you to go, to go to parties. We went just the same, a little bit of Catholic Church sometimes, we got along good. Yeah, unbelievable.

MN: Cause you were brought up Catholic?

SS: Yeah, uh huh. Nobody, we went to services and that was it, but sometimes they'd have something going on at Easter time, that's when we'd go. We used to like to go, they'd give us little flower pots or something.

MN: What church did you go to?

SS: Sacred Heart. I go up to Holy Rosary now, but I still belong to Sacred Heart. Cause it's just a nice little walk on Nichols St., I don't mind walking up there so that's where I usually go. But I give my envelopes, I support the Sacred Heart. But I was born and brought up there, I would never give it up. I remember one of the boys (coughs) excuse me, became a priest, that lived, lived in our neighborhood and he used to say, "I know how to get along with the League of Nations cause I grew up with it." (laughs) There were a lot of Finns and Swedes at the time there. Yeah.

MN: Around this area.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

MN: And then, did you finish high school?

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SS: Two years. Um hmm.

MN: And what did you do when you left high school?

SS: I was babysitting there for awhile, then I went to, I went to start, I started working at Heywood's. I was about 18. From 16 till I was about that age, I was babysitting. I used to take care of a little baby, their folks were photographers. Used to go on the road alot.

MN: And with, did most of your brothers and sisters leave high school before the four years?

SS: No, I think my sister Martha graduated, my brother Frank graduated. That's it. I don't think anybody else did.

MN: And what possessed you to go to Heywood's? Instead of one of the other companies.

SS: That's all that was available, really. See, I didn't have no, I didn't have no book learning, really enough to go in the office, but I didn't care for that kind of work anyway, office work. I liked my job packing. This was a rat race, that's all.

MN: Yeah, tell me, 'cause you have a really good memory, tell me how it was when you first got the job, you went to the employment office,, or did you know someone?

SS: No, my sister, my sister, she was a secretary, she worked for, for the foreman that hired me. She got me the job. He knew her well, so through her I got the job.

MN: What year was that?

SS: Oh, gee, that was way out, 1933, no 36, I don't know, see that was, un, ooh, many years ago, I'd say about what year did I graduate high school if I would have graduated? It was about

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1933, somewheres, what would that be now, that'd be 50, 80, maybe 1936 or somewheres around there. Could have been.

MN: So you had gone through the depression with your family.

SS: U~~M~~ hm.

MN: Do you have any strong memories of what that was like?

SS: We were poor. I remember, I didn't even have, I might as well say, I didn't even have shoes on my feet. There were holes in 'em. I used to wear socks for gloves. We were real poor. We had, there was a house similar to this, we had just one of these, little pot belly stove in the whole house. I don't know, God provided, that's all I can say, but you wonder how you pull through. Yeah. My mother used to cook all the time. We didn't go hungry.

MN: Was your father laid off during the depression?

SS: Well, my father, he ran his own business. He started at Landsford, he was the type of a guy, he never would go for welfare, and people didn't know him, they thought we were rich because he always had a cigar in his mouth, he was a very proud man, but really, we were poor. Yeah.

MN: So he started his own business?

SS: Yeah, On lamps.

MN: Oh.

SS: Yeah.

MN: During the depression?

SS: I don't know if it was during the depression or not, I couldn't tell you that. I don't have too much of a memory, see I'm a very nervous person and that's why some, a lot of things

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get blocked out in me. I can't remember. My nephews tell me things they did when they were here. I don't even remember.

MN: And then, you started working where in Heywood's when you got that first job?

SS: I did the same thing I always did, packing furniture. I started with that, I ended with that. I had to stop on account I had exzema on my hands and, and so I had to stop with disability, that was in, I believe that was 1973.

MN: So you worked from '36 to '73.

SS. Well, I worked 40 years, yeah, would have been exactly, about 40 years that I worked, yeah.

MN: In the same department?

SS: Um hmm. Yeah.

MN: So tell me what it was like, when you first were young you went in, and tell me exactly what you would do? As a packer?

SS: Well, see at that time it was mostly chairs, they didn't have no bedroom sets or anything like that. That started when I was there. Cause I was on chairs and tables. And then they started the bedroom furniture and dining room and so on.

See, at that time, they had big, big business, Bloomingdales, and that has stopped. After that, I don't think the work was ever as good as when we had the Bloomingdale orders. Yeah.

. MN: So if you would go in in the morning, tell me what you day would be like. I mean the details, I'd put this on that, I'd do this.

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SS: Well, it was just, all we'd do, we didn't have a conveyor at the time, we had, we had somebody give us the work and we had chairs we'd have to put bustles on, and put them in the boxes.

MN: What's a bustle?

SS: It's, it's a pad, excelsior, that stuff inside of it, you had to tie it around the arms and so forth, then you put them in boxes and you tape the boxes. Sometimes you just put the two chairs together, how did we do that, now? Gee, isn't it funny? Yeah, they all fit in boxes, as far as I can remember, even if you had two, you had to put one on top of the other, put 'em in a box, but I wasn't strong like some of the girls, my back,, so I used to, they used to pick 'em up and put 'em in the box, I never did that, I put the box over, they thought it took longer, maybe, it didn't really take longer, the time I was saving on myself, _____(unintelligible), so I thought it was a much better way for me anyway.

MN: Was it piecework?

SS: It was, see, the way, the way that job paid it was, it wasn't piecework at first, no, you got so much a hour, course at that time, maybe 20¢ an hour, you're lucky you make about \$9 a week. Not even that, but we never made big money on furniture, just at the end, last year I worked and that was about, little over a hundred dollars, that's all. I don't ever remember making \$5,000 a year. I would have made it that last year but I had to stop on account of disability.

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MN: And that was full time?

SS: Full time. There was never no money. Well, you can see when I retired on social security, now working 40 years, and I collected at 62, I had to take a cut, all I was collecting was \$217.00. Well, you can see that, now see I go on my husband's so I get about \$600 and better, I can live good with that. NO problem on money today. Yeah.

MN: And when you got the chairs, would somebody tell you which ones you'd have to pack or would you be able to choose.

SS: No, they brought 'em to us. We always had a guy that would bring us the work. I think Joe Bogdanski, too, I think that's what he used to do, give us some, he was one of them, sometimes to pass the work to us. I guess I know Joe good, 'cause _____
_____ (unintelligible) my partner. Yeah.

MN: So would he say, "Ok, Stella, here's two chairs for you,"--

SS: No, just hand 'em, pass 'em to us. We were all in a, all in a line and as it comes along they, how in the heck did they do that in the beginning, in the first, from the first work there. Oh, somebody would bring carts on the floor, that was before the conveyor was and, well, maybe at first, when I first, first started, we probably took our own. It was on the floor we just took as we went along. That could be then. (Lots of background noise))

MN: I'm sorry, in the beginning, what?

SS: I think in the beginning, I'm trying to figure if they still used to give us the work or they just used to throw on the floor and, you know, whoever get one first would take a piece or

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so on, could have been that way.

MN: Were there easier pieces and harder pieces to pack?

SS: Oh, yeah. Big, big difference. I almost lost my job because when they, when they were putting the women and the men equal, equal, equal rights, well, the men didn't want to help the women then, so we're in trouble. Some of the women could handle their own, but I couldn't. But it finally worked out all right, though. They did help. And used to, see like these big table, cause this came from _____(unintelligible) I used to hate to wrap big tables. Two girls would push 'em in a box. It was a hard job, too. And the chairs, see a thing like that now, that would, all you do is put a pad and a cardboard cover, you could do that in about, less than two minutes.

MN: What's that called?

SS: That's called, we call that a, I don't know what you call it, a cabinet, or--

MN: A cabinet?

SS: --or something like that. It was, we had three categories. We had the chairs and the little night stand would go with the chairs, that'd be one price, one might pay 10¢, one might pay 5¢, we don't know what we pay, but that would be one, one line of work that we'd have to take turns on. It'd be the big stuff, like the bureaus, a table, but you, take, you can do two, three of those, one table. And see the money you make if you can do that kind of work, so you would get easier work at times, you don't know what you're going to get. You would get that, maybe

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a table, whatever would come fir-, next. Or some of them had glasses on, and _____(unintelligible) was a lot of work. I used to hate them. You got more money, but like I said, you could do three or four of those to one of them. And there's no work to that. 'Cause we we would have to handle the work. The guys would bring it to us and everything like that and they would take it out. Just the chairs they would put on our line when we had a conveyor.

MN: And somebody, the guys that bring in work, if they really liked one of you, would they give you lots of cabinets?

SS: Well, the only way they could cheat on that (coughs), excuse me, the only way they could cheat on that is when the guys, see, conveyor would be working this room and right next, like that, would be a big open and the guy, man would be burning in. Well, he'd have maybe a half a dozen stuff in his place, well, he could, he could, there's one, the girl before me, I know he, I don't want to mention names or anything; 'cause, but anyway, he used to favor her. One guy, there was one guy that used to do that and the guy that used to work out on the line. Work on. And he'd take a piece and he'd put it there, naturally, I'd get the harder piece. Oh, I used to get mad then, oh, God, I don't know how I didn't lose my job.

MN: Did you complain?

SS: Oh, yeah, but I can't prove it, there's no way I can, and then you get in trouble with the girls, too. Don't say too much because they figure that you're picking on them. They don't know what's going on. But I could see it happening.

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MN: With what girls, you could get in--

SS: Well, the one that, that I'd be accusing of getting the good work, see, 'cause it'd be that one person all the time. Yeah, I didn't like that.

MN: Would they, would people kind of watch each other to see if somebody was making a lot more money than somebody else?

SS: No, you don't have to do that, 'cause we all took turns on our work, so nobody had to. 'Course what hurt the job a lot, one girl would be sitting down all the time, she'd get done way ahead of us. And that put her at the job, there was only one, I guess, it didn't matter that much.

MN: What do you mean, sitting down all the time?

SS: Well, she could get done ahead of us. And naturally, she wanted more work, she probably fight for more work while she's hanging around, but she never did.

MN: Why was she sitting--?

SS: She was just faster.

MN: Oh, she was just faster.

SS: Yeah, yeah. She was just faster. I don't know if she had better work or what, but she was fast. I was fast, I was so long on that job, my gosh, yeah.

MN: You were what?

SS: When I was alone sometimes on jobs, my goodness, no body could beat me. Now you see, there's a lot of pressure when you work for somebody else. Like I went on a job one time, it was on a _____ chest with a _____ (gummet?). That's

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a little screw, you put it in, a little baby could do it. And naturally, I could kill that job. It ain't _____
_____ (unintelligible) John was here, he'd say, well, you're cheating on the company, no, but you got to take your, take your time so you won't hurt the job. And so that's what I used to do. "Cause then, somebody else went on the job the following year. When I went back, and me go back after that. My God, you have to, even though it's a baby's job you have to go like mad. I said, I'm not going to do it no more. You can make, see a job like that, you can kill it, too. So I never burned the company. So we had a union. That's why I'm so strong for union and so strong for union. I don't care if they can do all the damage in the world. What's most important of all, hold your job. That's more important than any money, and that's what it did, it did protect your job. And so, I says, "Did I ask to go on that job?" He says, "No." "Ok, I'm not going." If I asked for it, I'd be stuck with it. They asked me to go on it. But you see, it's so easy and you couldn't tell 'em that why they went on that wildcat strike that one time, that was so, 'course I blame the union for that, too.

MN: Well, let's go back for a minute, well, I'll remember to talk about that, uh, OK. Back to how people sat, so that woman that was really fast, she wouldn't take the pieces away from everybody else--

SS: Oh, no.

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MN: She would stop, if she--

SS: Yeah, go around, that's all. But that's not all that good when you, see, it's better to take your time and let it last. But you couldn't tell 'em that.

MN: Did the timers ever come and time you?

SS: Oh, yeah, we'd always get timed on a new job. See, I know, one girl, one place, she, well, she was making more than a man, she quit after because when they timed her when a new job came in another year, she couldn't make nothing. Well, I knew that was going to happen. That was another factory, that wasn't In Heywood's. But no matter where you go, you can get by with it until they time you on something else, they get you there. But that the company, 'Cause they do it fair, I never blamed them for anything.

MN: What is it, then?

SS: It's the people themselves. They were, now, see, the boss told 'em when they went on strike. You're not going to get more money, you're going to get more help. You're going to put someone else on the job. So they weren't going to get anything. But--

MN: Well, if--

SS: See, like the union should have done, before the three days are up, they should have had us go back to work. They never did. We lost everything, but we got it back in no time. We kept getting it back over the time.

MN: Did, uh, go back to the early days, you said it was stand-up

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job, wasn't it?

SS: Yeah, we stood up all the time. Yeah, was standing.

MN: And you said there was a line of women. Was there only women?

SS: Um hmm. There was no men, about five or six of us that were wrapping. That, excuse me, one girl, sh'd do the pallet sets, you know, rocking chairs and all that stuff. She, that was a hard job, she'd do that, she'd handle that by herself. We'd do it once in a while, we helped out.

MN: Oh, so that was sort of her speciality?

SS: That was a different job all together , yeah, yeah. And I remember that, they had the high chairs, I remember when that went out afterwards. Carriage department went out, I guess and all that.

MN: So you could tell all the kinds of furniture they were making 'cause you packed everything that went out of the shop, didn't you?

SS: Yeah, _____ (unintelligible) we did them sometimes, too, yeah. That's right.

MN: Did anybody else ship it out, would have, was there another packing department somewhere else in the plant?

SS. I don't think so. They used to have, when they had the carriages, I think. Carriage department they had their own, I think, it might have been the men packing there, though. I remember they did have that, I guess. Upholstering, they had upholstering. That stopped after, I guess. Well, upholstering went with living room sets and all that, so they always had that, I guess, yeah.

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MN: So in the early days, you said, it was just chairs.

SS: Chairs and tables, all I can remember, yeah.

MN: And then--?

SS: Furniture start coming in, the bedroom sets, the dining room sets, the big, I don't, one of the big uh, well, the maple came afterwards, mostly, was, when they started the bedroom sets, see, in that bedroom there, that champagne, that's a Heywood set. And then they had the blonde. Those were big sellers. But then that, like I said, that's about, I remember all, especially my brother, you're crazy, Heywood's is never going to go out, you're going to be dead before they go out. I used to say, it's six years before it happened, I could see it coming. And the work was coming back, too much of it. It was going out, it was, like that guy was saying, I, I was surprised how they used to split open, I got a chair in the bedroom I got, right now I got tape around, split open. But back then I noticed a lot of stuff was going out bad. Yeah.

MN: That's what I couldn't understand at the reunion I was trying to figure out why people weren't quality conscious at the end. Why was it going out bad?

SS: That's what I like to know myself, why that was happening. I don't know if the money wasn't good enough, if they were doing it too fast, or what. Could have been anything. But, see, John said I was wrong, but I remember when they start selling the lumber to Canada, that was the first start of it going. I, I said it at the time. I said, that don't look good. And then they

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start sending the furniture to Tennessee. They, I think they blame Greenwood, yeah, they do blame Greenwood for, they blaming him for everything going the way it did, but I don't think so, he probably knew it was going to happen and he got out, too all of, I think that's what happened, he was a nice gentleman, Mr. Greenwood was, but a lot of them said he took everything and made a, got the company broke the way it was, but I don't believe so. I think what happened was, he knew it was going to happen. It was invetible, invetible and he knew it. Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know. 'Cause I know a family that stayed, lived with him over there when he went to Cape and they said he was very, very, there were a bunch of kids in the family, they used to, folks used to do the work for him, you know, they said he was very nice to live with, his wife and him. Yeah.

MN: Would you see him around the plant?

SS: He used to come around, yeah, when, he, when he was involved in it, he used to come around. Oh, yeah. He was a nice looking man, you never met him? Real gentleman. His son looks nothing like him, you'd never know that was his son. I don't know if you know him, he's a locksmith? Nothing like his father. No. Looked like a movie star, Mr. Greenwood did, yeah.

MN: Would he know your name or speak to you?

SS: He was very friendly, come in, I don't know if, I don't remember calls my name, I don't think he'd bother calling anybody by name, you'd have to be there, you know, more often and long with people for that, I guess. But he was always pleasant,

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MN: When you were doing the jobs, was it you packing alone or would you be in a team with another woman?

SS: We'd be alone. Only once in a while when we had big tables there'd be two of us. Or big, big beds, they had big, big boxes, there'd be two of us would have to put the box on. And put the table in a box. Outside of that, we packed alone. We each had our own little booth (chuckles) .

MN: Own little booth?

SS: Well, section. Each had our own section.

MN: And would you put pictures up of your family or other little personal things there?

SS: Well, it was, all open space. The only thing, I had a big _____ (unintelligible), I used to hate that. Big, big tank all the heat used to come off of it, water or something, I don't know. So I used to put alot of padding around so I wouldn't get all that heat. Then I'd have to open the window, somebody be kicking, the 'window's too cold with the window open. It was a little bit hard on that, too, 'cause I like it cool, I don't like it hot, too warm.

MN: And then, you would have breaks, wouldn't you?

SS: Oh, let's see. Not too much of a break. I think we had a break in the morning. I should remember that. Isn't it funny I can't. Yeah, I think we did have a ten minute break in the morning. Think we did. We sure did.

MN: Did you smoke cigarettes at the time?

SS: No, I didn't. I smoked in my lifetime, not much, but

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I didn't smoke in the shop.

MN: What did people do at break or at lunch time?

SS: Well, a lot of them wanted to smoke, go in the, the toilets were small. But then they had guys watching, too, but then they had, they had like a recreation room they could go and smoke, too. That was like a little cafeteria, they had machines, if you wanted to buy food. Yeah.

MN: And where did you eat your lunch?

SS: On my bench there, sometimes I'd walk home, sometimes I'd walk home. One hours time, walk from Heywood's, up here and back down there, (Laughs) That's a lot of walking.

MN: That's a long walk.

SS: Yeah, yeah. Used to walk to high school from here.

MN: And if you ate at your bench, would the other women also be eating at their bench?

SS: Um hmm. Yeah.

MN: And did you make friends with anybody in your department?

SS: Um hmm. I'd fight a lot too. (Laughs)

MN: Get an argument going?

SS: Yeah. You know, I never wanted, I used to tell them to work a little easy, not to keep going the way they're going, they're going to kill the job, which it really did happen. Yeah, can't make them understand sometimes.

MN: Especially, probably, the new people.

SS: Well, no, not that, the new ones were nice. It was a break when the new girls come in, for the, two of them to come in, they

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didn't believe in working like that. Yeah. But I suppose they did what they thought was right.

MN: Were they trying to just make more money?

SS: Could, well, I suppose everybody was trying to make more, well, it didn't really matter if you, 'cause you were day work it didn't matter at that time. Yeah, I remember that, and when we went, when we went piecework, still didn't make any more money almost, didn't make much money than we did on day work.

MN: Oh, it stayed about the same?

SS: Uh hmm. Afterwards, it jumped some.

MN: Do you remember when they went from day work to piece work?

SS: Oh, see, it's a long time after, I remember that. It must have been when, well, not that much longer, I think, 'cause when they put the conveyor on it must have been, it's hard to explain that job, it was piecework, but it was almost like a day rate. 'Cause you could only make so much, anyway. And you weren't allowed just a certain amount, if you did that, you'd be cut. Say, you, maybe you were allowed to make a dollar an hour, you'd make over that, you'd be cut.

MN: What do you mean, cut?

SS: Well, they'd cut the prices.

MN: They'd retime it?

SS: They could, they could retime it if they wanted to. But they probably wouldn't cut it right then but you're always getting new work coming in anyway and they'd time that and that would be cut. But you still, they wouldn't give you no money,

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anyway, I think if you did go over they wouldn't give it to you anyway. I'm pretty sure you could only make so much.

MN: Did people have kitties? You know, they pack five, say twenty chairs, but they'd only hand in ten? So they'd keep the other ten for a day when they didn't feel good.

SS: Oh, yeah. We did that alot. We used to, I almost forgot that, no, I know what we did do, you brought that out. Say we make \$2.00 worth of work an hour, we'd take a dollar out and put in the kitty, like you said, and the next day you don't make it, you have it to put in. Remember, we used to do that, I forgot all about that. That was very important, yeah. That's how we worked it.

MN: And would you have a group kitty, or everybody had their own?

SS: Everybody had their own. 'Cause see, the way everything worked over there, everything you packed had a tag. One you put on and one you keep, you pass that in. And that's how they could tell what you made. Yeah. They had a girl doing that job and her job would be label the stuff as it comes through.

MN: Now, did you have a foreman?

SS: Yes, yeah, Johnny Chase was our foreman. Ronald B _____ was our super. And Jack Horrigan was, our first one was Ronald _____, that's who I got my job, through him, he was a , he was super, and---

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MN: All right, Everybody had it. Would the foreman know that everybody had a kitty?

SS: Well, I guess they did. They must have knew that. Yeah, 'cause if you pass it in, it just wouldn't get paid for, that's what would happen. 'Cause you're only allowed so much money.

MN: Did you call it a kitty?

SS: Nope.

MN: What did you call it?

SS: Didn't call it anything. Just money that we put away. Tickets that we put away when we needed it. Oh, they would come in handy.

MN: Someone also told me if someone made too many things, the other people would get mad. They'd say, "Hey, slow down."

SS: Yup, that's true. That's too bad that, I seen it go through all that and go on strike, if they only had taken their time and worked, more normal, the way they should, like I said, it's true, you're gonna get a piece like that, that you can kill that job in no time. Why not take your time and let it last. The company wouldn't care on that, 'cause alot of time for that to make up, sometimes you got to go to the bathroom. you got to have time out. And that's not cheating on the company in any way at all. No. If it was always look like that where we slow down the job, then I say would be wrong. Want a cup of coffee?

MN: Yeah, I'd love one.

SS: But I--

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MN: You worked at the company through World War II, right?

SS: Um hmm.

MN: So could you see the company go through different changes during World War II? I mean, how was it different during the war?

SS: Not, not really, The only thing is they made bunk beds and the barrack chairs. We packed those. Of course, they had war work, but I wouldn't know much about that, that was a different department.

MN: Did you stay with packing furniture?

SS: Um hmm.

MN: Well, what about those screws you told me about? Didn't you--?

SS: That, well, that wasn't packing furniture, but it went with the furniture. It was still packing screws for the chairs. That's why I use that term, always furniture. Yeah.

MN: So you didn't, they didn't make you go on war work. They didn't ask you --?

SS: Oh, yeah, we had to go, but that, see, that was not our department. Those screws was not in the furniture department. That was done in another department altogether.

MN: Was that part of war work?

SS: Yeah, because see, those, all that stuff became, those chairs were not, it came separate. You had to put 'em together. That was why those screws were separate set.

MN: Did you have to work on the screws throughout the whole war?

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SS: No, they had different ones, we didn't have to do that all the time. That just happened about that time, and that, after that I don't know if they had somebody, somebody from my own department up there after somebody from another department, I don't remember that now. I didn't go no more. But that was only for, that only lasted for a while, anyway. That was a long time.

MN: And did you have to do any other kind of war work?

SS: You know, it was just on the beds, the bunkbeds and the chairs. That I can think of.

MN: You had to pack those?

SS: Um hmm.

MN: And there were a lot more women in the company during the war, weren't there?

SS: Um, there was about, they come in gradually, I didn't take no notice. Yeah. I really didn't.

MN: And then after the war ended, didn't a lot of people get laid off?

SS: No, I don't think so.

MN: But that didn't affect you?

SS: No, didn't affect our department whatsoever, no. No, no way.

MN: So, you continued on what you were doing pretty much straight through?

SS: Um hmm.

MN: Would you still be packing bureaus and beds and chairs during the war?

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SS: Yeah, um hmm, you still had that work, oh, yeah. And they had, a different line of furniture that came in, they had the pine. That went on for a while I guess.

MN: Maybe we should talk, you know more about this, more than most people maybe, if you can tell me about the union. When you first heard about it.

SS: I don't know, I'm trying to think. Gee, that was, 'cause I remember, I don't, I thought me and my Bill were the first one, I don't remember anyone else talking about it, how we got started on it, must have been going around. And everybody was against us, I remember that, they didn't want to belong in the union, and Bernard and I, we fought for it. Say we're going to have it. Finally did get in, that's all I can say. 'Course alot of them against closed shop but they don't understand, it wasn't a closed shop all the time. But once it's a closed shop you've got to join because we're going to be fighting for you, which wouldn't be fair anyway. But alot of them, well, maybe you should, I don't know, wait thirty days and see if they're going to stay then have them join the union. There's two ways of looking at it. If it's a closed shop, you can't blame them either. But like I said, unions aren't always good, I know that, but--

MN: What, what didn't people like about it?

SS: Well, they're afraid at first. But waht they don't realize. Simplex don't have it, but don't they realize that why they're being treated so good? Because they don't want the union. We're helping them, too, without them realizing it. They don't

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want the union get it, so they're going to be good to them.

But otherwise, it'd be a different story. Oh, they're looking to see how things are, but, what was I gonna say now, something--

MN: What people didn't like about the union? You were talking about?

SS: Well, I don't know, I suppose they didn't know if it would be a good thing to get into at first, I s'pose. But like I says, oh, I know what I was gonna say. Now, see, if it wasn't for the union, I never would have got my pension. Was through them. Well, they had a, I'm afraid to say his name, he was a son-of-a-gun. I told him, if I was a man, maybe I'd beat you up, but then you could hug him, he was so _____ (unintelligible). That was _____ (name), I don't know if you every heard of him, but he was a company man. He was a fall man. No matter what he did, he didn't have to worry, he'd never lose his job, and if anything, I'll tell you what happened then, I think one of the union guys told me. If anything went wrong, the company would be in the clear, he'd take, he'd get the blame for it.

I think that's what happened there. Any _____ (unintelligible) he says that I went to the union hall and I didn't tell 'em the, well, that's not the word he used, it wasn't tell the whole story, I don't think the union knew everthing. Well, anyway--

MN: What was the story, what happened?

SS: Well, he said I wasn't disabled. So I did go back there but they were on the telephone, they were arguing back and forth. Said, she's not terminated. She's on sick leave. So finally I

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won. But if it wasn't for the union, I would have lost that, too. So you see how important the union is. It isn't the idea making money, protecting, a lot of people don't stop and think, it's protecting your rights. All the money in the world ain't gonna do you no good without a job.

MN: You told me a story once about a grievance that you'd had where the man said something about Italians and you yelled back and--?

SS: Yeah, I don't want, I really don't want to say anything about him, though, I don't want to drag down his name.

MN: Well, don't say his name.

SS: Well, yeah, he asked me if I wanted to, I did give blood, but that's my business whether I give or not and I says, "No, I'm not giving any more." He says something like, "You're just like the rest of the hot headed Wops, they're gonna kill 'em all." That wasn't a nice thing to say. And that was why he didn't dare to do anything when I told him that time that if he wanted a white slip, he didn't get one before me, I said.

MN: What's a white slip?

SS: Well, that's a warning, next time you could lose your job. So that's what I had, my brother wanted to get ahold of him and give him a beating when I told him what he had said, that wasn't nice, but I was told, he was a nice person, though. And I sit with him. Very nice person, whatever made him say that, I don't know..

MN: And did you bring that up to the union that he said that?

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SS: Oh, I told the Stewart, yeah. I told her, that he told me one time, I said, if he ever starts anything. She was a fast Stewart, anyway. And he told her, people are laughing at me, well, I can see his point, I says, how do you think I, he says, how do you think I feel? And she says, "How do you think she feels? When you talk to her?" 'cause what happened there, that was the girl I was fighting with all the time. She wasn't, she got the work done faster than me, you know, instead of, I, always tried, well, _____ this job without realizing, she didn't mean it. And I said, we're talking about something and the guy that gives us the work, he's not there, there's a nice boy, and he came to talk about it, and then I was involved. See, that's what got me in, he says, "I'm not talking to you." So I says, (whispers something, unintelligible), told him right out where to go. He didn't like that. Just came out of my mouth when I saw him talking like this, talking to me like that. But it did concern me.

MN: What, giving out the work?

SS: No, this is something we're talking, some grievance we had, and we're talking about, but I was arguing about, I _____ (unintelligible), I don't know what she had done at that time but our work was coming to something, something to do about the work. I forgot what it was all about now, really. But it was something to do about the work. And he had come to talk about it, and, you know, after all, he had to come straight on the situation all the time, and that--

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MN: Was he a union representative?

SS: Huh?

MN: Was this man a union representative?

SS: No, he was just a guy that worked on the line with us. He gave us the work. We always had a guy that would give us the work. On the line, we couldn't take our own work out. Small stuff you could, but not the big.

MN: And did you have union meetings during work, or after work?

SS: I think a couple of times we had them during work, I think. Anyway, when there's supposed to be, when they're negotiating for strike, that's the only time, I guess.

MN: Yeah, tell me about that, there were, what did you mention to me about the wildcat strike? What was that?

SS: Well, we, uh, that was when we, that was just us girls walked out.

MN: In the packing department?

SS: Yeah, just the packing department girls, we figured they couldn't get along without us, I guess. And we wanted more money. But I was against it. I said, you're not going to get more money. And so, what happened there, see, that's what you call a wildcat, yeah, but the union should have done, should have made us go back, 'cause a lot of people are going to walk out strike, but they go back to work before the, I think even the policemen one time went out on Wild--, I'm not sure now, but you got to go back before the three days are up. You don't lose nuttin. But they didn't let us go, didn't tell us to go back.

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Well, that's what happened?

MN: So you lost your seniority?

SS: Yeah, but we got it all back in no time, though. They gave us so much back.

MN: And how, who, how did it happen, I can't picture it. Somebody said, "Oh, let's leave."? Or--

SS: Well, yeah, it just gets to the point, I mean, it's not a thing that comes all at once. You're not satisfied what you're making, see, you know, days in and days out, and just decide go to the union decide on that. But, like the boss said, we didn't win, and the boss said, you wouldn't get no more money anyway. Would have put in more help. So would have lost anyway, either way.

MN: And you went to the union and they said walk out?

SS: Yeah, at the time, actually, they don't tell you what to do, but they kind of tell you in a way, they give you advice. If I were you, or something like that, they'll never actually tell you what to do. So they were backing us, 'cause we were doing what they wanted us to do, really.

MN: And the company took you all back, afterwards.

SS: Oh, yeah, we all went, we all went back to work within, afterwards, we went back, we were working, did we stay out, yeah we staying out for three days and went back the fourth day 'cause we knew after the fourth day, you lose your job if you don't go back anyway. But that's what, we lost our seniority, though.

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But that's cycles of your job, you're a beginner, that's right.

I was right what I was saying.

MN: But you got it back.

SS: Yeah, they give it all back so much of the time. Got it all back no time at all, though. Yeah, you really lose out on it.

MN: You remember more or less when that was?

SS: That was a long time ago. It was furniture, I remember, but it was a long time ago.

MN: After the war, though?

SS: It must have been after the war, the war was in '46. Yeah, it must have been.

MN: And then what about the, the big strike that came up in the '50's.

SS: The what?

MN: The big strike that came up in 1956?

SS: Yeah, I remember that one now. We're all out on that one.

MN: In the fall, it was October, November.

SS: What happened then? We didn't gain nothing then either.

Take in the strike in _____(unintelligible) now. I really don't know too much about it, it might have been fighting for vacations or something, I really don't know too much about that one.

MN: Did you go out on strike?

SS: I think we all did. We all went out on strike on that one. Yeah.

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MN: Did you walk the picket line?

SS: I never did.

MN: Why not, I would think you would somehow.

SS: No, not on that. I don't remember walking the picket line.

I don't remember. 'Course those that did got so much I guess, out of it. I've forgotten, I think they did get something.

Not sure.

MN: Well, would you cross the picket line?

SS: To go to work? I don't think so, if there was a strike I don't think I would ever cross, I'd stay out. Could be too dangerous. 'Cause people are on strike and you're going to work, they can get pretty mad. They can come do something to your home or something to, they can't, that I wouldn't do, I don't think. I don't remember if I was in the picket line, I remember a picket line but I don't--

MN: You remember it?

SS: Yeah.

MN: What it look like? How was it?

SS: It just had signs, you know how they march up in front of the building, up and down.

MN: Do they yell things, or sing?

SS: No, I don't think they, I think it was pretty quiet. Yeah, never heard it was that bad in Gardner.

MN: And then when people went back do you remember if that caused any problems after the strike?

SS: I don't think so.

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MN: And then, someone said there was yet another one in the '60's. Do you remember there being a lot of them, or--?

SS: No, not too many. I don't remember too many. They had about, it could have been about three anyway, yeah, there could have been another one. I won't be surprised. Seems like they did have another dispute or something. How come we never walked out, that's (coughs) must have been concerning everybody for everybody to walk out. 'Course they have union meetings, that's how they start, they put, they roll on us if they're gonna strike or not.

MN: And what about, you were telling me about the equal rights when the men and women, when the women got more or less equal rights?

SS: Yeah, that came about, I'm gonna get a cough drop.

Remember when the law came, the law came about, the men and the women, that, wasn't that during war time? When that came about, Martha? This tastes like chewy fruit.

MN: I don't remember when that, I know the equal rights were big in the 1960's.

SS: That's about when it happened. Yeah, it was more, yeah, it was after the war when the people, men and women wanted equal rights. Somewhere's in the 1960's I believe that was, yeah. It wasn't that way in the beginning.

MN: And then, how did that change what you were doing?
Or influence it?

SS: Well, it didn't seem too good at first, because the guys,

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they didn't want to help you. They figured, equal right, you do your own, but, we won out on that, because it was their job to give us the work, but they just do what they have to.

MN: So they wouldn't, if you had a big, heavy table or something, would the guys help you?

SS: They would, but they didn't like to. So some of the girls they learned to do it themselves. It was pretty hard, the job was rough at times. But I liked packing, I always liked that.

MN: What did you like about it?

SS: It was a, you use a lot of energy, you know, working, and on your feet, I didn't mind being on my feet instead of sitting down, cause you walk around, you're not standing still all the time. I like that.

MN: And could you talk or visit with the women with you?

SS: You could talk, well, you could visit, too, if you wanted to, if you had a few spare moments or something. Oh, yeah.

MN: Yeah, one woman told me that somebody taught her how to knit at lunch time.

SS: I'll be darned. Yeah.

MN: Did you belong to the social club?

SS: Um hmm.

MN: And did, what kind of things would they do?

SS: That means, that, they used to have a Christmas party for the kids and I used to love that. I used to always take a kid with me. My nieces and nephews, I got a picture there, I got five of them there, I guess. The picture's over there.

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And then, used to have outings in the summer time, that's about, you know, belonged to it, but they didn't have too many things going on.

MN: And they also had the Shop News.

SS: Um hmm.

MN: Did you used to read that?

SS: Um hmm.

MN: Do you remember what parts of it you liked, or would read first.

SS: Well, in, some like at _____ Falls, guys would go hunting, and they had pictures of the hunting, or someone would get married, or interesting things to read, yeah.

MN: Oh, follow up who's get married--

SS: Yeah, different things, you know, yeah.

MN: Did you meet your husband at Heywood's?

SS: Met him on a bus coming home from Washington, D.C. We picked up a bunch of soldiers in Connecticut, they were going to Ft. Devens, and those, they just moved to Arizona, these Polish people from Norwich, Connecticut. He says, I'll sit in the back there, and this guy told me, he says, you see that girl up there? I'm going to marry her. Then, he' come to sit with me, there was an empty place next to me, can I sit with you? I said sure. Then we stopped to a restaurant, it was a funny thing, oh, I don't want to hold you because are busy with that. But that's how I met him anyway.

MN: So, tell me, tell me, I would like to hear it.

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SS: There was a, when we were sitting in the restaurant, there was a grey cat that came jumped on my lap and I was so scared. And, it was some kind of a joke on, and anyway, he said I'll see you on Sunday, but somehow they shipped him, they were going to ship them to Japan before they bombed Hiroshima, so I hadn't heard from him for a few months, and then I was at a theater one night with my mother and this great, this grey cat, looked the same thing as the one in that restaurant jumped on me, I said, I'm going to hear from him, that same week I got a letter. It was a funny coincidence. That's how we met. Then in February that year, that was in summer time, July, I guess, that was September I heard from him, that year, following year, February, I guess it was, he was discharged, he came down the house. That's how we met and that same year on Thanksgiving Day we got married. That was quite a few months afterwards, though.

MN: And he moved up here?

SS: Not at first, though, he didn't want to come over here, but it turned out for the best. Didn't have no job there after. And he got, well, he didn't have much to do over here for a while, anyway, then he got a job Independent Lock in Fitchberg. First he went up to Florence Oil Stove for awhile, then been at Independent ever since, till he retired.

MN: And what did he do at Independent?

SS: Machinist. Yeah, he knew what tool, they were poor, too, he had it kind of tough. He never went, he only went up to the third grade, I guess, but he took up, he studied blueprinting all

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that, you can make a way for yourself. Yeah. A lot of high school kids couldn't do that, so there you are.

MN: Book printing?

SS: I mean, uh, work on machines. Yeah.

MN: How come he didn't work at Heywood's?

SS: He wouldn't care for furniture. There wasn't a place where anybody really want, really wanted to go that much in Heywood's. I don't think. He didn't care for furniture, I'm pretty sure of that.

MN: And what were you doing going down to D.C.? Just for a trip?

SS: On a dare, I went by myself, yeah.

MN: All by yourself?

SS: Just on a dare. It was meant to be. Something sent me there. That's where I met him, coming back. Right near the Capitol, right near the light house, near the Capital, that's where I was staying, 'cause I could see the lights there at night.

MN: And you toured around by yourself?

SS: Yup, went to the movies on a day, they had busses. Yeah, it was meant to be, I guess, that's all.

MN: And then you said that, remember, you could see that Heywood-Wakefield Co. was going to close.

SS: Hmm, I could tell, I don't know why, it was just a guess at the time, but, I don't know, I said, when they, they had different, there was a guy, somebody told me, that came from New York one time, some, like a big shop, anyway. But you know

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something's wrong when they send somebody like that over there. It wasn't long after that things were going down, down, downhill. But it's just like I said, when they start sending the lumber to Canada, before that I kinda thought that somethings going to give there, why, maybe just sense of feeling or something, I don't know.

MN: what do you mean, sending the lumber to Canada?

SS: They were sending lumber there. I don't know what they did, if, I don't know if they _____ (unintelligible) and sent it back here, treated it there, I don't know why, but, cause we remember John said they did it, then the other guy's, they remember, I don't know if it was New Brunswick or not. I didn't like that idea, I said, "Why would they have to do that?" And then after that, like I said, they were sending that stuff to Tennessee. 'Course they had a good excuse, they work cheaper and all that, but how long did that last? They probably did at first, but then they won't. afterwards. But they still got that plant there, though. Yeah.

MN: Did people think the whole company was going to go south?

SS: _____ (unintelligible), so I think. Yeah. Like I said, the work was, they used to tell me, "You know," I said, "it's not good. Too much bad stuff is coming back. That's not good," I said, "aren't going to like that." You know, might once in a while have to return stuff, but they ain't going to like that. And that's what happened.

MN: did you, how did you feel when it closed?

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SS: To me it didn't matter. It's a funny thing, from the day I started, I was looking for the day I retired. (laughs) I stayed forty years. That's something. I had to work anyway, there was no choice.

MN: Did you mind going to work?

SS: No. Just like I said, at times it was really rough,, I did mind it that way. Not the job, but to keep up. If the girls, they all worked a little bit different, you know, and if got along some little bit better, things might be different.

MN: How come you didn't switch to a different department?

SS: 'Cause I like packing. I didn't want to work in the paint shop. I always need the fresh air, I mean, paint would bother me. They didn't have much_____ (unintelligible). 'Course there's one job that was easy, but I guess I was nervous, I wouldn't be able to put my mind on it. I don't know how I write letters sometime, **but, put the tags** on the furniture, that was an easy job. Still had to have your mind on, put the right piece, tag on the right piece. I could have probably got that one time.

MN: And were they always after you to go faster?

SS: No, they didn't, they didn't keep after you to go fast, but you know, you have to, just have to. If you always got the same kind of work, it'd be different, but you didn't.

MN: And when the time came, I don't know if you were there when Russell described, he had a system, so he would go sort of, not slow, but he wouldn't go too fast when the timer was there.

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SS: Oh, yeah, you're always _____(unintelligible) on that to, not to rush. Work normal though, but never rush. That be the most foolish thing you can do. 'Cause you're not going to be able to keep it up that way.

MN: Did you have a special system in order to go at a good steady pace?

SS: Yeah, well, you could do it;

MN: How did you do it?

SS: I don't know how to explain that but just work normal, that's all. Just don't keep rushing. Just go like natural.

MN: Do you mind that they've turned them into apartments?

SS: You know, I predicted that, too. I said, "Some day I bet they'll have apartments there." And sure enough. But you know, beautiful inside, but the outside still looks like a shop, don't it? My sister and I could live here, but she said, "It still looks like a shop." But it's pretty inside, some of them buildings. Apartments, rather. But the new ones gonna be made really nice _____(unintelligible) building.

_____ (unintelligible) more going on, I guess.

But I can't, I can't live with these elevators, anyway. That's one thing I could never do. I'd be waiting to die, that's all a place like that, I, I don't like that. I don't like elevators anyway.

MN: It'd be funny to live where you had worked.

SS: I know it. I worked right in the other _____ where they're working on now, that's where I worked.

MN: On the Pine St. side?

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SS: Well, on Central. But I also worked on Pine St. way down there, too. When first one used to be way down by the step, first building that you go in.

MN: And Stella, this is one last thing. Did how you pack the things change over time?

SS: They were always about the same system. Yeah, there was really nothing that you could change in a packing there. Trying to think. I was trying to think if the chairs always went in boxes, I was trying to think. I think they did.

MN: And you always kept track of how many you made, you yourself.

SS: You had, we had tickets. You had to have the tickets 'cause you wouldn't get paid if you didn't have those.

MN: Did you ever hear the expression, "Pushing the pencil"?

SS: Did I ever have what?

MN: Hear the expression, push, people "push the pencil"?

SS: No.

MN: Meant, so if you did 320 somebody might write down 380?

SS: Oh, you mean change the, put in more than they really did. No, I don't think you could do that, get by with that. 'Cause you couldn't, I don't think you could steal the tickets. I doubt if you could _____ (unintelligible). And if you did, they found out anyway. They could tell. And you know, it goes out, what don't?

MN: OK. Thank you.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B